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ABSTRACT

In Sweden the International Association Evaluation of Educational Achievement in written composition study involved 4,500 students from grades 6 and 9, as well as students from the terminal grades of the upper secondary school. Students wrote essays of various kinds and replied to questionnaires. Essays were evaluated according to content, organization, style or idiom, and readability. Girls appeared to score better than boys; the link between gender and attitudes to school is a strong one, so that girls wrote better essays because they take a more positive view of writing and school work in general. Eight writing tasks are included. (KEH)

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DECEMBER 1989 **FIELD-TOPIC** **1989:11**
Essay writing
Writing instruction
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Concluded project:

THE IEA STUDY OF WRITTEN COMPOSITION IN YOUTH EDUCATION

The Swedish part of the IEA study involves pupils from grades 6 and 9 of compulsory school and the terminal grades of the upper secondary school.
They have written essays of various kinds and replied to questionnaires.
The study conveys facts concerning methods and results of assessments of the essays, presents the pupil´s written achievment and indicates factors, which, judging from the survey material, influence the pupils´ writing ability. These results also provide input material for discussion of methodology.

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Teachers training and preparing their pupils for writing can use essays or texts by professional authors as illustrative examples. The pupils are then asked to discuss and analyse these reading passages.

As a rule, teachers assess analytical exercises of this kind once or twice a term, in order for the pupils to learn, for example, ways of constructing a comparative or reasoned account. It is above all upper secondary school teachers who employ various exercises in the treatment of a particular kind of text and the use of reference literature.

Far more often, the teachers give their pupils exercises in writing technique and language variation. Language proficiency training is conducted more in compulsory than in upper secondary school, and especially at intermediate level.

Developing the pupils' writing ability by means of exercises in using subject material and by means of language skill practice is of course a preparation for essay writing. This preparation, however, is more general and does not usually focus on the next occasion for written work.

Swedish teachers at the senior level of compulsory school and in upper secondary school hardly ever make preparations for essay writing in the sense of discussing with the pupils what they are going to write about next time. They do not discuss how the subject can be organised, they do not show the pupils examples of words and expressions which can be used. Preparing the pupils in this way is generally looked on as intermediate level methodology, and one-third of intermediate level teachers report that they frequently employ a methodology of this kind.

The more attention one pays to preparing the individual written assignment, the less risk there will be of the pupils performing badly. Helping the pupils and enabling them to succeed is indeed sounder methodology than telling them after the event how they ought to have gone about things.

Preparing the individual essays, however, takes time, and many people probably feel that the time allocation for Swedish lessons does not afford scope for much more than a "post mortem". At the senior level of compulsory school and in upper secondary school especially, discussions

seem only to occur post facto. One may ask, however, whether it is rational to devote so much time to writing as is usually the case. Mostly these long allocations of time are defended on the grounds that the pupils need time to choose their subject, think about it and plan their essay before they actually get down to writing. But with preparations made in advance, it should be possible for the time spent writing to be cut down a good deal.

Teachers in other countries seem invariably to prepare their pupils for essay writing by talking with them about the subjects. This is the practice in countries where pupils may be both younger and slightly older than Swedish senior level pupils in grade 9. And so, as a natural consequence, it is unusual for the pupils to have to write about unprepared subjects, which is the method most commonly used in Sweden.

The IEA writing project

These facts have emerged from the Swedish section of the IEA study of written composition, the principal aim of which was to describe the teaching of written composition and to try and explain differences in the pupils' writing ability. The study took place during the 1984/85 school year in grades 6 and 9 of compulsory school and 2^2 and 3^3 of upper secondary school. Altogether some 4,500 pupils took part, with roughly equal numbers at the different levels.

The written tasks

The curriculum gives a number and variety of examples of written assignments which can be used to teach the pupils different kinds of writing. Most of these assignments are actually used in teaching. There are some of them, however, which the pupils quite seldom have the opportunity of practising, while some again do not appear to be practised at all during the pupils' school careers, either in compulsory school or in upper secondary school.

In the IEA project, the pupils were given written assignments of various kinds. In connection with each assignment they were asked to state whether the type of assignment concerned was common or uncommon in the

teaching they received. The pupils were successful even with assignments of a kind which most of them considered unusual. In certain cases they had difficulty in finding a suitable style or idiom, but they were not unsuccessful in transmitting their message.

But even if it seems that pupils can also cope with unusual written assignments if they are possessed of general writing ability, it is probably essential for them to be given the chance of practising such types of written work. Undeniably, teaching becomes more variable if the pupils are confronted with different writing situations. This also gives them more reason to think about whom they are writing for and how, accordingly, they should express themselves.

The pupils were asked to write on the following subjects. Figures in brackets refer to writing time and grade.

1A (20 min., grades 6 and 9)

Suppose you have been to see your grandfather. In the town where he lives, you spotted a fine display of bicycles in a shop. The shop sells boys' and girls' bikes and has many models of different colours and with many accessories, e.g. baskets, lights, toe-clips on the pedals. Now you have received a letter from your grandfather, promising you a bicycle for your birthday. Choose one of the bikes in the picture. Then finish the following letter. Describe the bicycle you want in such a way that your grandfather will be able to buy you exactly the right model. (Picture of five bicycles)

IB (20 min., grades 6 and 9)

You are going to visit somebody (a penfriend, a relative) who has not seen you before. Write a good description of yourself (what you look like, what you will be wearing, if there is anything particular that makes you easy to recognise, and so on), so that he or she will be able to spot you immediately.

IC (20 min., grades 6 and 9)

You have an appointment at the head teacher's office at 10. But then something unexpected happens to you (a valid but not very unpleasant reason), preventing you from keeping the appointment. Write a short note to the head teacher so that he or she will not have to waste time waiting for you, and apologise for not turning up.

ID (20 min., grade 6)

Arriving home from school you find that there is nobody there. You expect some member of your family to turn up before long. You want to go and see a friend of yours for a couple of hours, but you don't want anybody to be worried because they don't know where you are. Write a short note to somebody at home, explaining where you are going, who you will be with and what time you will be back.

IE (20 min., grades 9 and 2^2, 3^3)

Holiday staff needed:
- Office assistants
- Delivery personnel
- Gardeners
- Warehouse persons

Young persons who have completed their compulsory schooling may apply for an interview. Minimum length of employment: one month between 15th June and 31st August. Apply in writing, stating the job and period of your preference, to

Municipal Offices, Personnel Section, Bridgetown.

Having seen this advertisement in a paper, you want to apply for one of the jobs. Write a letter, asking for an interview.

5 (60 min., grades 6 and 9)

Choose one of the story headings below and describe what happened or might have happened to you. You can change the heading if you like, to make it fit in better with your story.

Your story will be assessed with reference to how good a story it is, how vividly and exactly you have succeeded in describing situations, people, events and your own feelings, and how interesting it is to read what you have written.

Your story should be long enough to fill at least one page.

1. A difficult decision.
2. I did it - at last!
3. My good deed.
4. My dream came true.
5. I found a new friend.
6. The worst thing that ever happened to me.
7. Then I understood what it can be like for other people.

6 (60 min., together)

Think of something you have a very firm opinion about. It must be something to do with your home, your school, the place where you live or society in general.

Write an essay, giving reasons for your opinion. Try to convince the reader that you are right.

7 (60 min., grades 9 and 2^2, 3^3)

Below you will find a number of statements and questions. Write an essay in which you think about and reflect on what is said and state your own views on the matter. You can agree and disagree with different views on the subject. When writing, you can refer to your own observations, to books you have read, to films, plays or other things which can add to what you have to say.

Your essay will be assessed with reference to what you have to say, how well you manage to convey your thoughts and how distinctly you express them.

Find your own heading, or use one of the following.

1. Does watching television make it harder to think for yourself?

2. Many young people today find it difficult to talk to older people and understand them.

3. What would happen if pupils had more control over what they learned in school and how they learned it?

4. What would the world look like if the role of women in society were to be radically transformed?

5. Acquisitiveness is the main thing preventing people from living freely and nobly.

6. One is never so lonely as in a crowd.

The international study included other written tasks as well, but Sweden used only the ones quoted here. Each pupil wrote two or three essays. Some of the tasks were only given to a selection of pupils. For example, some grade 6 pupils were given 1A, 1D and 5, others were given 1B, 1D and 5, and so on.

Make use of the pupils' interest!

Older pupils usually write essays about twice every term, while those at intermediate level mostly have essays to write every fortnight. At the senior level of compulsory school and, above all, in upper secondary school, essay writing takes the form of examinations. Many classes have long writing periods, often examination days at a fixed point in the term, and marks are usually awarded for the essays which are written. These

occasional writing sessions are felt to be important, and understandably, the pupils read and correct their essays carefully, so as to hand in the best possible product.

The writing situation at intermediate level is different. Pupils there write more often and have shorter time in which to do it, often only one lesson. Writing an essay is not looked on as an examination but rather as practice in describing something one has experienced or imagined. The pupils say that writing is fun, but that there is no real need to read through and check what they have written.

The pupils' written production, whatever the level of school, is not usually followed up, except for the teacher reading the essay and, as a rule, indicating points for the pupil to alter. In compulsory school the teacher can talk to the individual pupil about what ought to be altered and improved. As a rule, however, the essay is not more extensively processed or re-written. The normal practice is for something one has written to be looked on as over and done with, once the errors pointed out by the teacher - mostly of a formal nature - have been corrected.

Pupils enjoy writing. More than half of them think that writing is fun or great fun, and only one in ten is bored by it. This interest, of course, is something which schools should act on.

It is essential that writing sessions should be exercises rather than tests. Written examinations must of course be held, with the pupils confronted by a situation where, unaided, they have to write and complete an assignment, e.g. in the form of a standardised achievement test in compulsory or upper secondary school. The majority of writing sessions, however, should be undramatic occasions. The compulsory school curriculum prescribes a methodology whereby essays are processed by pupils and teachers together. The more detailed aspects of the way in which work should be organised are described in the commentary material Writing. This material has been incorporated as a direction for the teaching of written work in the new Swedish syllabus, effective from 1988.

Assessment of essays

Great importance has been attached to making the assessment of the pupils' essays as objective as possible (the term "essay" is used, even though some of the utilitarian assignments are not really essays in the strict sense). We have subjected every essay to an overall assessment. This is the method most commonly used in Swedish schools. In judging the overall quality, one probably has a rather vague view of its various constituent parts and the importance attached to each of them. Thus one can take into account the content and organisation of the essay, linguistic variety and correct usage, and then try to merge these things into a comprehensive assessment. Probably the overall impression made by an essay is mostly founded on a more or less consciously struck balance between different aspects of assessment.

The overall award has been supplemented by an analytical assessment, and in this way it is possible for several assessments to be made. A number of aspects or parts are decided on, and an attempt made to concentrate the assessment on these alone. Particular importance can, for example, be attached to the content of the essay, and the initial assessment made to focus on this only. When evaluating the content of the essay, one must then disregard the way in which the material is organised, and one must be equally oblivious to the quality of the language. Content apart, organisation and - above all, perhaps - treatment of language are aspects which are separately evaluated.

The aspects for which marks were awarded on a five-point scale were content, organisation, style or idiom and readability (correctness of grammar and spelling). In addition, legibility (hand writing and neatness) was assessed on a three-point scale ranging from distinct, easily readable handwriting to virtually illegible.

Marks for the essays were awarded by about fifty teachers who had been specially trained to apply the international assessment. Each essay was marked by two teachers, except assignment 6, which was marked by three.

Pupils cope equally well with different tasks

A few brief observations about the pupils' achievements are worth mentioning. Several assignments had been written by two grades together. Usually the higher grade scored higher average marks, which is hardly surprising. The average rose by half a step.

The pupils were given different kinds of things to write about, e.g. a practical subject, a narrative subject, a polemical subject. The correlations between their marks for different kinds of work, in all grades, were in the region of .50 or slightly more, whatever the kind of work, which means that the pupils received the same or almost the same marks, i.e. a deviation of one point or step at most. It seems, then, that pupils acquire a general writing proficiency. On the whole, they cope equally well with unusual or familiar types of written work.

Attitudes and marks

After each essay, the pupils were asked whether the assignment was usual/unusual, difficult/easy and boring/fun. The fact of an assignment being usual or unusual does not mean that it is thought to be difficult or easy, nor that it is felt to be boring or fun. On the other hand, the pupils find difficult assignments boring to write and easy ones fun. These correlations are strongest for the 60-minute essays.

Correlations between marks and questions are low. Thus, generally speaking, the frequency with which written assignments occur in teaching, their level of difficulty or their attractiveness do not appear to make much difference to the pupils' achievements.

Analytical assessment pedagogically valuable

Experience of the assessment method pointed to consistently high correlations (.85) between the overall mark and the subsidiary marks for content, organisation and style. The correlations between the formal skills, readability and overall impression were less pronounced. Because the correlations were so high, the overall marks have been employed in the calculations.

On the other hand, an analytical assessment can possess great pedagogical value. It gives the teachers an opportunity of bringing out, more prominently than otherwise, a certain aspect of the pupils' treatment of a written assignment. It may perhaps be appropriate to supplement the traditional overall assessment with a mark for organisation, for example, in cases where the material can be organised in a variety of ways. On other occasions attention may need to focus particularly on style and idiom, as in some of the written assessments included in this study. It would seem to be important, not least, for marks to be awarded for legibility and neatness.

The pupils probably pay more attention to the valuation of an aspect when it is not merely general and verbal but is also expressed in graded terms. A more concrete, lucid assessment of this kind can probably also help to bring home to the pupils that the quality of their written work is not just a matter of correct formal usage.

Essay appraisal subjective

If marks for essays are to be comparable, the people awarding them must make identical demands when evaluating the pupils' achievements. They must apply the same scale. They will then award the same average marks.

Average awards for work marked by five teachers varied by about half a point. A greater difference applies to work assessed by a larger number of people, and with about 20 teachers marking the essays, the difference can amount to roughly one point. A difference of this kind can mean considerable inequalities in the evaluation of individual essays, since the differences between judges operate in different directions.

Even if average marks are equal, an additional yardstick is needed of the way in which the judges place the essays in ranking order. This relation is expressed in coefficients of correlation. In the IEA study, the relation is about .70, which is the value usually obtained in studies of this kind. Thus the differences between teachers' assessments of essays appear to be equally great, no matter whether the teachers make a traditional assessment or are specially trained to analyse and assess particular aspects.

This, of course, is an unsatisfactory state of affairs, especially for the individual pupils, because the valuation of their achievements often has a bearing on their continuing activities, e.g. as regards admission to higher education. Probably, though, this is as far as we can get in terms of unanimity of appraisal. One might compare this situation with reviews of books, films, plays etc. The analogy may be a false one in certain respects, but disagreements between critics, just as between teachers, are fundamentally due to differences in their experience, attitudes and ways of looking at things. Thus we cannot standardise the valuation of artistic performance, and it is hardly desirable that we should do so. Most often the final valuation is governed by an average approach. Thus it has not been possible to make assessment of the essays sufficiently objective to facilitate comparisons with pupils in other countries taking part in the study.

In trying to find paths towards better agreement between teachers' assessments, we mostly attempt to devise methods which will induce the teachers to view the completion of a written assignment in the same way. We are concerned with the product of the pupils' writing, and when analysing it we wish to arrive at shared valuations. Other departures, however, have been hinted at in a recently published textbook of written composition for American college students. In it the students are told to ask their teachers what they feel are important points to bear in mind for written work, what are the main points to which assessment at the college relates, and so on. Questions of this kind can be asked during or outside lessons, but the essential thing is for the pupils to find out things which, in the teachers' view, it is important for them to consider in order for an essay to be rated good. In their written work, the students must try and adapt to the teachers' expectations.

It is possible that action of this kind on the pupils' part could lead to greater consensus of assessment in a school. Perhaps it can encourage a discussion of a common code of practice at the school to be instilled in the pupils, things which they should bear in mind and observe when writing. At present, pupils seem to have odd views of teachers' assessment priorities. For both in grade 9 and in the 2-year upper secondary school, pupils believe that it is formal aspects which decide the mark awarded for an essay. If only one can spell properly, punctuate and write

neatly, one will have met the essential requirements. These matters carry more weight than aspects of content, such as choice of subject, planning and wealth of imagination. It is only students in the three-year lines of upper secondary school who emphasise aspects of content, and they too attach importance to formal matters.

This conviction on the pupils' part that their formal language skills are the main factor deciding the marks for their essays cannot reasonably have been derived from their teachers. True, the use and structure of language are practised in compulsory school, mostly in separate exercises of different kinds, but attention is also attached to discussing different kinds of text and their structure. It is unlikely that discussions of the planning and organisation of essays are neglected in teaching. If anything the pupils' opinion derives from the fact that it is mostly their breaches of conventions of grammar and spelling which are commented on in their essays. Comments in the margin are more palpable, manifest evidence of deficiencies than more generally phrased remarks at the end of the essay.

Counting words

Long essays usually score better marks than short ones. Word counts were performed on three hundred essays to test the feasibility of this kind of linguistic measurement. Correlations between marks and numbers of words in the essays proved to be the same or every bit as high as between the judges. Word counts are as reliable a means of assessment in studies of this kind as the use of teachers for assessment purposes.

Factors influencing the pupils' writing ability

In a causal analysis using the marks for essays as the dependant variable, it was found that the pupils' results at intermediate level could above all be related to gender and spare-time reading interest. Girls score better marks than boys. At the other levels we find the explanations in gender and educational aspirations, while interest in reading makes no significant difference. The link between gender and attitudes to school is a very strong one, so that girls write better essays because they take a more positive view of writing and school work in general.

Of course, this is not to say that pupils' achievements are unaffected by school inputs. Teaching in school must reasonably be assumed to make a difference to the development of their writing ability. Teaching, however, is not only characterised and determined by the way in which the teachers describe their modus operandi when replying to questions in the questionnaire. Their opportunities and ability to motivate and enthuse the pupils may depend not so much on the method they employ as on factors relating to their personalities. And so it may be difficult to find causal relations between teaching variables and writing performance as long as one is unable to keep the psychosocial climate of the classroom under control.

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